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Colby Library Quarterly

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March 1964

No. 9

LETTERS FROM DR. ALBERT SCHWEITZER IN THE COLBY LIBRARY

By J. SEELYE BIXLER

IN 1960 I left in the Colby Treasure Room a few letters from Dr. Albert Schweitzer that had been received some twenty years earlier. Professor Cary, the Curator, now suggests that they be published, and he has asked me to write a word of explanation. I have agreed to the suggestion in the thought that, personal and "homely" (in the English sense) as the letters are, they show a side of Dr. Schweitzer which today we are in danger of forgetting. Some people have placed him on so high a pedestal and made him so inaccessible that we are hardly surprised to find others attempting to downgrade him and to minimize what he has done. The truth is, of course, that he is a man of extraordinary intellectual and personal achievement who is at the same time a modest and unpretentious worker for his fellowman and a very warm-hearted and loyal friend.

I shall never forget the natural, unaffected cordiality with which he greeted me when I first visited him at his home in Königsfeld, high in the Black Forest, in October 1928. My credentials consisted of a letter from President Lowell of Harvard inviting him to deliver the Lowell Lectures in Boston. Dr. Schweitzer quickly declined the invitation, saying that his hospital responsibilities would not allow a trip to America, but he suggested that I spend the morning with him and, as it turned out, the day. In his book *Inside Africa* John Gunther has remarked that Dr. Schweitzer is interested in ideas and music but not in individuals. As I think back on the way he welcomed a complete stranger on that occasion and took time away from his study and writing to discuss theology for hours,

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with now and then a pause for music, I cannot help wondering whether Mr. Gunther knew what he was talking about.

At the close of a memorable day Dr. and Mrs. Schweitzer suggested that next time I should bring some members of my family. Accordingly in the following February my wife and oldest daughter, who was then a child of seven, accompanied me from Freiburg on a visit to Königsfeld. The Schweitzers' daughter, Rhena, was a year or two older than my daughter and while the two girls played together and the two ladies discussed matters of common interest, Dr. Schweitzer gave me another day of fascinating talk. We saw him again in Switzerland and heard him lecture and play the organ. In later years Mrs. Schweitzer and Rhena visited us several times in our Cambridge home during lecture tours on behalf of the Lambaréné hospital. We saw Dr. and Mrs. Schweitzer once more when they came to Aspen, Colorado, in 1949, and our last visit was in Gunsbach, Alsace, in 1954, a few years before Mrs. Schweitzer died.

It was on this visit that Dr. Schweitzer took us after lunch over to the church where his father had been pastor, and where he has himself now installed a remarkable organ, and gave us a private recital, with selections from Widor, Mendelssohn, and Bach. I had asked him to come to Colby to play our Walcker organ which is made according to the specifications laid down in his own book on organ construction. He had offered a somewhat critical remark about all organs built in the twentieth century and when he finished the music he turned with a roguish look and said: "Now you go home and tell those Colby people you've heard a real organ!" I did tell the students at the first assembly that fall all about our visit. The topic was especially timely because our Colby "Book of the Year" was Dr. Schweitzer's autobiography, *Out of My Life and Thought*.

The first letter is from Mrs. Schweitzer, and is the only letter in English:

Permanent address: Gunsbach près Munster, Alsace, France
Paris 12. xii. 39.

Dear Dr. Bixler,

Thank you very much for your kind letter which gave us much pleasure. We received it quicker than you expected as for special reasons we had to be in Europe earlier than we had meant to be. Our

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daughter has got married to a young friend, Alfred J. Eckers, engineer and organ-builder, whom we have known for years. They had some happy months together. Now, of course, he is with the army.

The excitements and anxieties we had since to live through and the sad state of Europe prevented me from writing. I do hope that your country may be kept in peace. For Xmas and the New Year I send our best wishes to you and your family, trusting you are all in good health.

With warmest regards from us all,

Very cordially,
Hélène Schweitzer

By the time the next letter was written, Dr. Everett Carl Herrick, President of Andover Newton Theological School, and a graduate of Colby in the class of 1898, had met Professor Everett Skillings of Middlebury College and me at my office in Cambridge to found the Albert Schweitzer Fellowship. So far as I am aware, this was the first of such groups to be formed. There are now several in Europe—in England, France, Germany, Holland, and Switzerland—and a number of similar societies, organized to help Dr. Schweitzer, have been started in the United States. Our idea was to collect money and supplies for the hospital during the difficult days of the war. With the much appreciated help of one of the oil companies we were able to get medical supplies through to Africa and contributions of money soon began to roll in. I recall that my desk was piled high with appeals to Dr. Schweitzer to give lectures and recitals at practically his own price. All were declined until the Aspen offer some years later.

The "friend at Newton Seminary" mentioned in this letter is, of course, Dr. Herrick:

[In French] Lambaréné, Gabon
French Equatorial Africa
Via Marseilles (France)
Dakar, Port Gentil
12. 6. 40.

Dear Mr. Bixler—I am writing you from Lambaréné but will send the letter by air mail to Gunsbach and from there it will go by ordinary mail. Your letters of February 21 and 29, 1940, via Gunsbach, arrived yesterday, which is very fast. I want to thank you for your kind letters with such fine offers of lectures. In the first place, however, I have to stay in Lambaréné until the end of the war. Furthermore, I am not able to give lectures in English, not even if I read them. In England I spoke either in German or French, and there was an interpreter with whom I went over the lecture and who translated sentence by sentence. It went very well although it was a strain for me. How-

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ever, I readily understand that people would want the lectures in English, and so, naturally, I cannot expect to be asked to give any. I might, then, limit myself to giving organ recitals.

I have already written to Dr. Paul Moody of Middlebury College. Would you thank the friend at Newton Seminary who offers me such an advantageous sum for making the seminary my headquarters. I was deeply moved by his generosity. But for the time being I make no plans. I do not even know whether I could stay in the United States for so many months. My life is so complicated.

Would you also express my gratitude to the Northfield Conference for their invitation to give lectures. But it is impossible that I come to the United States before the end of the war since my presence here is essential if the hospital is to function. When the war is over, we will be able to make plans again.

The anxiety over funds in the next letter speaks for itself. Fortunately in recent years gifts have come in substantial amounts simply as a result of the public's knowledge of the man and his work.

[In French] Lambaréné
12. 9. 44.

Professor J.S. Bixler,

Ah, if war had not broken out, I might now be in the United States. For more than three years I have now been working at the equator. Naturally I often feel tired but fortunately I can endure this terrible heat.

My greatest worry is finding the means of supporting the hospital for the duration of the war. For the friends in the European countries that are at war or threatened by war can do almost nothing for me any longer; they have to take care of their families, their soldiers, and do everything to provide for their children. Hence, I beg my friends in the United States to help me during the war. For the hospital must stay in existence since the suffering of the natives of these forests is great. We cannot send away persons who have come distances of 400 kilometers [about 250 miles] to be operated upon. They have to have their operations and have to be fed until they can make the return trip. Our staff consists of three doctors and nine European nurses. Thus, if you can find donations for my hospital, I am profoundly grateful. And the simplest is if you send them by check *in dollars* directly here to Lambaréné. At the head of this letter I will give you the address for airmail letters from the United States to Lambaréné. Checks should be made out to "hôpital du Docteur Schweitzer." You might wait until you have several donations before you send a check. I am deeply thankful for all that is done for my hospital. The greatest expense is to get enough rice and salt for the patients and the nurses of the hospital. When will I see my friends again? Often I am sad because of all the worries about the hospital that weigh on me. There is a bank at Port Gentil where I can cash checks.

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Thank you once again for your good letter. I will send this letter by air mail to Gunsbach and from there it will go by regular mail to the United States.

My kindest thoughts for you.

Very sincerely yours,
Albert Schweitzer

The proposal that a Jubilee volume in honor of Dr. Schweitzer be prepared drew from him the following comment:

[In French] Lambaréné
French Equatorial Africa

Dear Mr. Bixler

You cannot imagine my surprise when, through a letter from Dr. Roback and a prospectus which was enclosed in his letter, I learned that there was being prepared in the U.S.A. a Schweitzer Jubilee Book and that it would appear soon. I am deeply touched by the interest and sympathy for my ideas and for my work which are shown in this undertaking. And that you should propose not only to contribute an important study of my work, but that you should assume the task of a member of the editorial committee, with all the labor that your own work in progress and the leadership of the college give you! I say to you as to Prof. George Sarton that this is no longer devotion but sacrifice. Sacrifice begins when one must write a good many letters in order to organize something. When St. Martin gave half of his cloak to a beggar (and I think he should not have cut it in two pieces but should have given it whole) it was only the prelude to sacrifice! One could extol him as a man who made a sacrifice only if one knew that he also helped to get a project going by writing letters!

Thank you, dear friend, wholeheartedly. You and those who have associated with you for this publication have truly touched me. I am writing to you in the consultation room, surrounded by the hubbub and stir which reign here! Toward the beginning of spring I hope to have two new doctors here. Then, although still being obliged to remain here, I shall be able to dream of having a less fatiguing life and of being able to concentrate on my third volume.

My wife and I send our kind thoughts.

Your devoted
A. Schweitzer

The next letter refers to an article I had written for the magazine *Christendom* (Winter Number, 1944) called "Portrait of an Internationalist." In it I had mentioned a brief impromptu concert of jazz to which he had once treated me. His comment on the lack of time for writing is both poignant and expressive of the strain under which he continuously labored. Even now, 1964, Dr. Schweitzer has not finished his projected work on philosophy, nor has he completed editing

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the works of Bach for the organ on which he started before the first war in Paris when Widor, the French organist and composer, was his teacher and colleague.

[In French] Lambaréné, French
Equatorial Africa
18. 10. 44.

Dear Friend,

What memories you awaken with your article in *Christendom!* It moved me deeply. How far away that time is! Yes, I really did play jazz for you on the piano. I remember it very well. Thank you for having brought to mind these memories. What has happened to the house in the woods and to the piano on which I played for you? And when will we meet again? Here one constantly drowns in work, but one keeps going. I have just recently finished the rough draft for a chapter of the third volume on philosophy, which permits me to indulge in the luxury of spending some of the evening hours on the letters I have long wanted to write. When I am busy working out a chapter, I dare not let myself take any of the few working hours that I have in the evening away from this task. All day I am busy at the hospital. At times I am so tired at night that I have to go to bed right away. But all day I keep the subject of the chapter in mind. I stay in touch with my intellectual work while doing the material work of the physician. But this is a terrible mental tension. I hope I can carry it on as long as I have to. But how much I hope for a time when I can devote entire days to working on the manuscript. Will such a time ever come?

I have heard from Dr. Skillings that you have done me the honor to write an article on my hospital. I thank you from my heart. You too must be so busy running your College that it will be hard to find time for the literary work that you intend to finish. I am delighted with the thought that we will receive [illegible] medications from the U.S.A.!! Forgive my not writing you in English. It is so much easier for me to do so in French. My wife and I send our very best regards to you, Mrs. Bixler, and the children.

A. Schweitzer

Many kind and grateful remembrances to you all!

Very cordially,
Helene Schweitzer

The next letter speaks of "tension," and the reference is to my article "Productive Tensions in the Work of Albert Schweitzer" in the *Albert Schweitzer Jubilee Book* edited by Dr. A. A. Roback and published in 1945. I had called attention to the dualism of "world-view" and "life-view" with its resultant tension of head and heart, which underlies Dr. Schweitzer's work in history, philosophy, and music, as well as his personal faith. The allusions to pragmatism are especially interesting.

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[In French] Lambaréné, French
Equatorial Africa
12. 5. 46.

Dear Professor Bixler:

I have read and reread your study on "Tension" which I have been thinking about. I admire you for having carried your analysis so far and for having been able to interpret my intellectual processes. If I know myself and can judge myself, I think I may say that you expressed what I feel and that you take into consideration what goes on in my mind. I felt this difference between *Lebensanschauung* and *Weltanschauung* even when I was a student. And when I began my philosophical studies and read the classical works of philosophy, I always had the feeling that there was something artificial in all these systems. I particularly like the sentence in which you established that I am not a "pragmatist" . . . When I first came to know the pragmatism of James, it rather shook me. And at the same time I, then, discovered the pragmatism of Nietzsche (and also of Bergson). I sensed what there was that is well founded in pragmatism; I sensed that fundamentally it starts with the same contention as I do, but the solution filled me with terror because it does not contain any searching ideas and lacks the profound respect due to truth. . . Reading your analysis has awakened all these memories in me,—memories of the inner debate (*innerliche Auseinandersetzung*) I held with James, Nietzsche, and Bergson when I was young . . . a wonderful time, a time when everything bubbled and simmered in me and I could concentrate exclusively on the problems of the spirit. And now the hours when I can do so are numbered. . . Often I suffer from it but then I tell myself that after all, I had the advantage of having had years myself during which I could devote my time to the great intellectual problems. . . And I still have the hope that, once I have shown the new doctors and the new nurses their task here, I will once again have time for myself, and will again be able to concentrate so that I will be able to finish the work that is so dear to me. But right now I am completely taken up with the hospital. I hardly find the time and energy for writing the letters I have in mind.

My wife went to the seaside several weeks ago to escape the great heat that we have at this time of year. Would you be good enough to give my kind regards to your family and accept my lively gratitude for the work you have done on my behalf.

Sincerely yours,
Albert Schweitzer

When he wrote the next letter Dr. Schweitzer had seen the Colby Bulletin with a picture of Dean Runnals and a photograph of the "missionary daughters." These stirred him to send greetings. Later when I saw him in Gunsbach in 1954 I referred to this letter with its remark that he would like to be transformed into a young girl and transported to Colby. I asked him if he realized that at Colby, except in war time,

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we had more boys than girls. "Do you!" he exclaimed. "That's a great mistake. If I were running a college I'd have only girls!"

[In German] Lambaréné, French
Equatorial Africa
5. 12. 46.

Dear Friend,

That I only now answer your kind letter of March 1, 1946 and thank you for the Colby College Bulletin is due to great weariness and much work. Night is almost the only time that I can devote to correspondence. Now I have an idea of what Colby College is like. Your lovely pictures make me wish that I might meet a medicine man who would transform me into a young girl and transport me to the college. But the picture I liked best is the first one in which you are all making music together. I can almost hear the tone of your 'cello. I have always had a special liking for the 'cello. When I was eleven years old, I heard my first 'cello solo, and it moved me deeply. But the girl in the Bacteriological Laboratory is wearing a blouse that is much too beautiful for work. Tell her I said that she should wear a real laboratory smock of strong material. The buildings are very beautiful. I have often thought of you drinking your after-dinner coffee on Sundays. It is an excellent picture, and especially of your wife. All this brings back memories of when we were together in Königsfeld. At the beginning of September my wife went to Europe and she may well be in Königsfeld about this time. The house is still standing and now serves as refuge for Germans who have been forced to leave the countries in which they were living. I am happy it provides a home for the homeless.

A thousand thanks for all the news of your family. I have to stay here for several months more for reasons that it would take too long to explain here. At the moment I am trying to put some order into that chaos of unanswered letters. Afterwards all the time that is not taken up with the hospital will be devoted entirely to the task of completing the third volume of the Philosophy. Many of its chapters have been completed; written during the course of the war.

The great difficulty now is to condense this much too voluminous book into one of the average size! Many parts have to be sacrificed! I do hope that my hand which is prone to develop writer's cramp will behave itself. Because of this condition I am forced to write as slowly as a pupil in penmanship class. That which takes up so much of my time are all those extra jobs: repairing roofs, floors, repairing lamps and motors, doing masonry work, the maintenance of the cement canals, located in between the buildings of the hospital, which during the violent tornadoes carry off the torrents of water coming from the hills into the river, and other sundry tasks.

When I saw the buildings of Colby College, my first thought was: Yes indeed, all our good Bixler has to do is simply to send for repairmen to make the necessary repairs whenever needed. He is fortunate. It is also fortunate for you that modern psychologists have not invented

Dr. Schweitzer 5. 12. 46⁹
Zambare. French Equ.
Tamil Africa

Monsieur le Professeur H. S. Bixler
Colby College. Waterville. Maine. U.S.A

Mein Freund. Minderheit aus viele Arbeit sich schuld daran,
dass ich so spät auf Ihren lieben Brief vom 1. 3. 46 an die Zusendung
des Bulletin der Colby College antworte. Ich habe zu fast nur die Kraft
stünden für die Correspondenz. - Also jetzt kann ich mir eine Tadeln
von Colby College machen. Die letzten Bilder umschicken sie mir den Wunsch,
dass ich einen Fetischmann antreffe, der mich in ein junges Mädchen
verwandeln und mich in das Colby College verschle. Aber das liebste Bild ist
das erste, wo Sie zusammen missigieren! Ich meine den Ton des Colby zu
hören: Ein Colby habe ich zu immer eine Tadeln gelobt. Mit elf Jahren
habe ich zum ersten Mal ein Colby-Solo. Das hat mich tief ergriffen. -
Aber das Bildchen in Bacteriological Laboratory hat eine viel zu schöne
Bleue an für die Arbeit. Sagen Sie es mir, sie soll eine richtige An-
haltmaßstab aus festem Stoff anlegen: die Gebäude sind fast schön!
Am Sonntag habe ich schon alle die Kiste an Sie, beim After-Dinner
Coffee steht, geschild. Das Bild ist fast schön, besonders mit the Frau
gut getroffen. Und da stehen die Erinnerungen des Zusammen
in Königsfeld sie mir auf. Meine Frau ist Anfang September
nach Europa gefahren. Sie ist verheiratet in diese Tage in Gued
Königsfeld. Das Haus ist erhalten ist belohnt. Ich Tadeln,
Bentele aus den Ländern, aus denen sie ausgewandert sind.
Es ist mir lieb, dass es dieses Bildchen als Gedächtnis.
Tausend Dank für die Nachrichten von Ihrer Familie. - Ich
wollen ihn noch genötigt eine Karte von Konstantinople zu Ihnen
habe, aus Gründen die dazugehörige zu lang war. Anzüglichlich

DR. ALBERT SCHWEITZER TO DR. J. SEELYE BIXLER
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a Slavic ancestry for you. I do know from Dr. Roback that you have worried yourself in my behalf. But he is so dear to me, that he can do anything with me. Don't take it too seriously. If you consider the kind of outrages that Freud has perpetuated, then Dr. Roback appears indeed very modest in his attempts of that sort.

My best wishes to you and your dear wife and the children. I thank you also for the lectures that you are giving about my work. What a help the American friends are for my work and how much their help means to me!

Most sincerely,
your Albert Schweitzer

Address letters to my wife in Gunsbach. They will be forwarded to her. Please send my regards to Miss Ninetta Runnals. I judge that she is the Dean or in charge of students. Please greet also the Missionary Daughters.

In conclusion I append the letter in which he gives his consent to publication. It was written in German from Lambaréné on July 28, 1963, and is translated literally and without deletions. The kindly man need not have feared that earlier letters had included either "unfriendly words" or even political opinions. On January 14, 1964, Dr. Schweitzer was eighty-nine years old. His friends pray that he may live to write many more letters and to continue the healing ministry which has meant so much not only to Africa but to the entire world.

Dear Friend:

I am wholly agreeable to the idea of publishing my letters to you of an earlier period. Only if there should be something political, or an unfriendly word about some person, would there be any objection.

When I write to you I feel younger than I am because I feel taken back to the earlier years in which I often wrote to you. How much you did for the hospital in that difficult time!

Here all goes well. We are 6 doctors and 15 European nurses. Unfortunately the hospital continually grows larger. I have not been in Europe for four years, and don't know when I shall go again. The work that must be done here does not allow me to go on journeys. Since I must not only tend to the hospital, but also direct construction, I am hard to replace.

With affectionate thoughts of you and the friends,

Yours,
Albert Schweitzer

